
Executive Summary

From October 1998 to December 31, 2000 eight sites in eight states (San Mateo County, California; El Paso County, Colorado; Baltimore, Maryland; Boston, Massachusetts; Cape Girardeau County, Missouri; Belknap, Hillsborough, and Merrimack Counties, New Hampshire; Pierce County, Washington; and Racine, Wisconsin) received Section 1115 grants or waivers from the Office of Child Support Enforcement/ACF to implement and test responsible fatherhood programs.

Objectives

The objective of these projects was to assist unemployed or low-income, noncustodial parents, mostly fathers, to pay child support by:

- Increasing employment or income;
- Encouraging more involved and better parenting; and
- Motivating child support compliance.

States were given wide latitude in program format, the services to be provided, and client eligibility. Although most states created or collaborated with community-based fatherhood programs, some programs were based in child support agencies and courts. Site strategies also varied, with some sites concentrating on child access and other sites stressing employment as ways to increase child support compliance. Diverse groups of clients were served: rural and urban; African-American, white and Hispanic; unwed and divorced; and noncustodial mothers as well as fathers. Over 1,800 fathers were ultimately served, of whom 1,674 are included in this evaluation.

Study Methodology

The study included two components: an assessment of implementation and a determination of program outcomes. Site visits and discussions with program administrators and staff were used to document program characteristics and implementation. The findings from that assessment were published in June 2001 in a report titled *OCSE Responsible Fatherhood: Early Implementation Lessons*. The outcome study relied on case data maintained at each site to generate a picture of

client characteristics, service delivery, and client outcomes. In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with project participants, and child support enforcement administrative records and employer-reported wage records were obtained from each state and analyzed. The results of this component of the study appear in this report, *OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs: Client Characteristics and Program Outcomes*.

Employment Services

Programs did a good job at delivering employment services. Slightly more than half (52%) of the fathers reported needing help finding a job, finding a better job, or both, and most of these individuals were served. Employer wage reports for one quarter prior to enrollment and two quarters post-enrollment showed statistically significant increases in the number of noncustodial fathers who were employed: employment rates went up by 33 percent in Maryland, 29 percent in Missouri, 16 percent in Wisconsin, and 8 percent in Massachusetts. Increases were also found at all but one of the other sites, although they were not statistically significant.

There were also statistically significant increases in client earnings for the quarter prior to enrollment and the second quarter post-enrollment. Largely due to earnings among those previously unemployed, earnings rose by 250 percent in Maryland, 58 percent in Wisconsin, 41 percent in Colorado, and 25 percent in Massachusetts. Increases that were not statistically significant were recorded at the other sites. However, both before and after enrollment, most noncustodial fathers continued to show low earnings with post-enrollment earnings across the sites, ranging from a low of \$704 per quarter in Missouri to a high of \$3,095, per quarter in Washington.

Child Support Enforcement Services

More than half (57%) of the noncustodial fathers wanted assistance with child support. About half of the fathers had not paid child support in the six months prior to enrollment, and median arrearages ranged from \$3,600 to \$9,881 by site. In the 12 months after enrollment, there were far more noncustodial parents making some payment. The increases in the percentage making payments were 31 percent for Colorado, 29 percent for Missouri, 26 percent for Washington, 19 percent for Massachusetts, 17 percent for Maryland, 11 percent for Wisconsin, and 4 percent for New Hampshire. Even though payments increased, most parents still paid less than the full amount due

■ and their arrearages did not drop. Among those making some payment in the 12 months following enrollment, parents paid an average of 36 to 72 percent of what they owed across the project sites.

Among parents with the lowest incomes, child support comprised a large portion of monthly earnings (21 to 61%). Although some programs referred clients for review and adjustment of their orders, few clients qualified. In California, which primarily offered clients the opportunity to mediate custody or visitation issues, child support payments increased among all parents referred for mediation, even for those who never participated in the process.

Improving Access to Children

Most of the noncustodial fathers wanted help getting to see their children more often (51%), improving parenting skills (39%), and improving their relationship with the children's mother (30%). At enrollment, a high percent of fathers were dissatisfied with their visitation arrangements and rights, even though in three states more than half the fathers saw their children once a week. Almost two-thirds (64%) lacked a visitation order, and 15 percent faced court-ordered restrictions on visitation. The most frequent interventions that programs provided were mediation, assistance to secure legal visitation rights, and client support groups aimed at improving parent-child relationships.

Follow-up interviews indicated that 58 percent of fathers saw their children about the same amount of time after receiving assistance; 27 percent said that contact increased; and 14 percent said that it decreased. Most noncustodial fathers remained dissatisfied with the amount of time they spent with their children, and wanted more contact. In California, the one-site that focused exclusively on mediation, divorced and never-married parents performed similarly with respect to mediation. About 40 percent of both groups appeared for mediation; among those who attended, about two-thirds reached an agreement.

Recruitment

At all sites, recruitment was difficult and time consuming. The sites varied in the clients they targeted and how they attempted to recruit them. Even those sites with the largest number of clients had to make tremendous efforts to identify and recruit low-income, noncustodial fathers. Child support agencies were a major recruitment source in California, Colorado, New Hampshire, and

Washington, and contributed 33 percent of the project participants across all the sites. In addition to recruitment from child support agencies, 24 percent of clients were recruited from community organizations and 19 percent were recruited from public agencies other than child support. No single recruitment strategy or referral source worked equally well across all sites. Most programs found that a wide recruitment approach, including both community organizations and public agencies, was necessary.

Case Management and Retention

Most of the programs aimed to deliver a set of services based on client needs assessed over a period of weeks or months. This goal required that individuals stay connected to the programs and for program staff to track the delivery of services to ensure that clients' needs were met. Many clients, however, were extremely mobile and were involved with the program for only a short period of time. As a result, staff lost contact with many participants who left the program before completing the full service plan that had been developed. High levels of client mobility make service delivery and program evaluation challenging.

Study Limitations

The study does have several limitations. First, it is largely descriptive and provides for only limited multivariate analysis. Second, because of the small size of many programs and the difficulties in recruitment, no treatment and control group design was employed. Thus, the true impact of the program interventions cannot be determined. Third, missing data from the administrative records and from the sites' management information systems meant that sample size for many variables were smaller than the number of participants, reducing the strength of any analysis. Fourth, due to outdated client contact information, the response rate for the follow-up telephone interviews with clients was insufficient to ensure that the findings can be generalized to all program participants.